



WISCONSIN LEGISLATURE

P. O. Box 7882 Madison, WI 53707-7882

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Contact: [Sen. Vukmir](#) 608-266-2512

Contact: [Rep. Kooyenga](#) 608-266-9180

Wauwatosa SOS has a Problem Sticking to the Facts

A rebuttal by Senator Leah Vukmir and Rep. Dale Kooyenga

As the debate over the 2015-17 state budget starts to wind down, Wauwatosa SOS continues to attempt to change the narrative regarding education funding in our state. A group, originally formed to fight for increased funding for our schools, recently has been spreading information that is simply wrong and misleading. The Joint Finance Committee, on which we both serve, voted not only to reverse the cuts proposed by the Governor, but also included a sizable increase.

After reading the June 3 column, we feel it is imperative to set the record straight regarding several of their assertions:

- *“The JFC claims to have restored Gov. Walker’s \$127 million cut in public school funding. This is not true. Much of this funding will pay for an expansion of the state’s funding of private and religious schools, siphoning away money from our kids’ classrooms.”*

One hundred percent of the referenced \$127 million will go to public schools. The state’s non-partisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau has confirmed the SOS statement is wrong. The \$127 million is a direct result of restoring \$150 per public school student (\$150 x 846,666 public school students). In addition to restoring 100 percent of the Governor’s initial cuts to education, we increased funding by an additional \$100 per student in the second year of the budget. For 2015-17, this is an additional investment of \$196 million over what the Governor proposed.

- *“The JFC’s actions will result in an overall reduction of \$600 million to \$800 million in state support to public education – and represents a \$600 to \$800 million increase in taxpayer funding for private schools.”*

The SOS group left out one significant detail. LFB’s projection includes a decade of expenditures. By extending the projection to include 10 years of funding, you can make any number seem overwhelming in the context of a \$70 billion budget. Projections of state public school expenditures over the next decade are \$46 billion. Using these numbers, the state’s investment in school choice is less than 2 percent of what the state will spend on public schools over the same period and less than 1 percent of the total public education spending in Wisconsin. We are providing families in poverty the ability to choose a school. Assertions that we are turning our backs on public schools are untrue and contrary to the fact that we have fought extremely hard for Wauwatosa public schools.

- *“The JFC also increased the enrollment cap on the statewide voucher program in 2016-17. The cap will increase annually for 10 years, when it will be eliminated entirely.”*

It is important to provide clarity for this assertion. The statewide cap will be eliminated with the passage of the budget, but an individual cap on each school district will remain. The cap starts out at 1 percent and will increase each year starting in 2017-18. Their assertion does not take into account a more restrictive cap on the program: an income cap. Participants are only eligible if their family income is below 185 percent of the federal poverty limit. For a family of four, this amount would be \$44,177. For a community like Wauwatosa, the expansion of the choice program will not have the same impact as other parts of the state due to our higher than average household income. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the median household income for a family of four in Wauwatosa in 2013 is \$67,800. The vast majority of families in Wauwatosa will not be able to take advantage of the expansion of school choice. This fact did not seem to make the final draft of the group’s opinion piece.

The Wauwatosa Public School District is one of the largest “choice” school district in the state. Choice in education is also represented by allowing parents to apply to another public school district through the open enrollment program. Wauwatosa educates a net 1,400 students from other school districts (mostly from Milwaukee). Under the open enrollment program, schools that lose a student are still able to retain a certain fixed cost for losing a student. In the case of a Milwaukee student, for example, MPS retains some funds even though Wauwatosa is educating the child. The new statewide choice program follows the same principle of the open enrollment system and the public school will still retain a portion of funding for a student even if the student elects to attend a private school.

- *“The JFC inserted a provision requiring public school districts to allow charter, voucher and home-schooled students to participate in sports and other extracurricular activities sponsored by the public schools – at the expense of the public school districts.”*

The text of the motion proves this statement is incorrect. The motion clearly states that the school district can charge a fee for these additional students if they charge a fee for the public school students. Treating all students the same is a matter of fairness and we believe most individuals will agree. Denying a property taxpayer’s child from trying out for a sports team, musical or other extra-curricular activity does not save the school district any money.

Throughout the budget process, we have attempted to work directly with the Wauwatosa SOS group. They asked the legislature to increase funding in the first year of the budget by \$100 per student, and then \$150 per student in the second year. We fought for, and the committee approved, a \$150/\$250 per student increase over the biennium as compared to the original budget proposal. But immediately following the announcement of the additional support, the goal post was moved by SOS. The sky is not - and will not - be falling in Wauwatosa. We have one of the best school districts in the state. School choice was created to give parents an option when their child is stuck in a failing school. That is simply not the case in Wauwatosa, as it is in other parts of the state.

We need to move past the sound bites and rhetoric and work together to find ways to improve education in our state over the long term. We need to relieve administrators of some of the burdens placed upon them by Madison, find ways to reduce costs incurred through construction projects and develop new state tests that will not hamstring our school districts. We continue to be faced with challenges regarding our educational system, and with this budget we will firmly place our students on the path to long-term success. We serve our children and community best by having an open and honest dialogue. The key to continuing this dialogue will be presenting the public with the facts.